

What Might Have Been by mille_libri

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Summary:

In the new year, Hopper and Joyce run into each other on the street and reflect on what they went through, where they are, and what might have been.

What Might Have Been

Joyce was leaving work when she saw him for the first time in the new year. They nearly bumped into each other on the sidewalk, and stood looking at each other awkwardly.

Hopper broke the silence first, turning his hat restlessly around in his hands by the brim. "Happy New Year."

"Yeah. Happy New Year. How ... How are you?"

He shrugged. "'Bout the way you might expect. How's Will?"

"He's good." Joyce smiled. She wouldn't tell Hopper about how pale Will still was, how he got tired so easily or how he excused himself to run to the bathroom and thought she didn't know. Or how he woke in the night screaming and took an hour of calming before he could remember that he was safe, that he had escaped the Upside Down. Deep inside her, she didn't want to admit that Will still carried the scars of that experience, not even to herself, much less to Hopper, or anyone else. "Did you get the picture?" Will had drawn one, to say thank you to Hopper for coming to get him, and she'd dropped it off at the police station in order to avoid running into Hopper.

"Yeah. He's real good at drawing."

Joyce nodded. She hesitated, wanting to talk to Hop; they had been through so much together. He had gone into the dark beside her, and he had saved Will. She wanted to trust him the way she had then, to feel that sense of the two of them as allies—as partners. As ... maybe something that could be real.

But he had also betrayed the other child, that strange and vulnerable motherless girl who had clung to Joyce in her fear. Eleven had trusted them—she had trusted Hopper. And Joyce knew that he had sold Eleven out, sold out all the children. That he had done it to save Will, to buy all their safety from those men, excused and explained what he had done ... but for all that, Joyce still couldn't forgive him for it, for the loss of Eleven and the pain she saw in Mike's eyes when she went to his house to pick up Will. Looking up at Hopper, she

thought probably he couldn't forgive himself, either.

Hopper cleared his throat. "Well."

"I better be going. I'm going to pick Will up from school." She wouldn't let him ride his bike home, not anymore. She wasn't taking any chances with him.

"You do that." He took a breath, as if he was going to say more, then let it out. "It was good seeing you, Joyce."

"Yeah, you too." She ducked her head and went around him, hurrying down the sidewalk toward her car.

Hopper turned and watched her go. He could sense what had been in her mind, the anger hidden under her gratefulness, and he wondered if she knew that he felt the same way. What he had promised, what he had revealed, in order to gain the safety of Will Byers and the security of the rest of Hawkins, would haunt him the rest of his life. But he hadn't had any other choice. If he hadn't told them where Eleven and the other boys were, the kids would have been found anyway, but there would have been no protection for the boys, there would have been no guarantee that he and Joyce could have gone into the Upside Down to look for Will ... and six families would be mourning instead of just the one.

He hadn't forgotten the other girl. Barb, that was her name. There had been terror on the dead face he had seen in that nightmare version of the Hawkins Library—death hadn't come easily to her, and it hadn't treated her kindly. With everything in him, he wanted to go to her parents and sit down and tell them that on the other side of everything they knew there was another world, a world like the real one but dark and cold and decaying, and their daughter had been pulled into that world and been lost there. But they would think he was crazy, and it would hurt them more than they had already been hurt. And wasn't there a grace in hope? He'd have given anything to be able to hope, to have the thought that maybe, just maybe, someday he would be able to hold his girl in his arms again. Of course, he would have driven himself mad looking for her, so maybe hope was less a gift and more a torment. It was hard to say, and he hardly thought he was cut out to make that decision for another set

of parents.

Far down the sidewalk, Joyce had gotten into her car and was pulling out of the parking space. She looked healthier than she had looked in a long time—she had filled out a bit, as if she was eating better now, taking more care of herself so that she could look after those boys the way they needed to be looked after. And that lost look in her eyes that had become so familiar before everything changed—it was gone, replaced by determination. She had fought for her son, against unimaginable forces. She had believed, in the face of everything that told her what she was experiencing was impossible, and it had given her back faith in herself.

But she had lost faith in him, just when she was finding it, finding a reason to trust someone else again. Just when she and he had become a team, just when he had thought maybe, someday ... That was gone now, gone the moment he had told that woman where the children were to be found. She had looked to him, to Hopper, to be a hero, to keep them all safe, and he had failed. Because he wasn't a hero—he was just an ordinary, practical, everyday cop, stuck in a no-win situation, and he had done the best for everyone that he could. That little girl's haunted eyes had joined the other pair he couldn't forget in his nightmares; he would probably see them for the rest of his life.

He wished he could tell Joyce the truth, what he knew of it; that he could tell that skinny kid, Mike. They deserved to know. But he had promised, and whatever else he was going to be from now on, he was going to be a man who could be counted on: to keep his word, to do what he said he was going to do, to look after the people of this town who were suddenly so much more vulnerable than they had any idea of.

With a short, sharp nod to himself, Hopper put his hat back on and turned his back on the street, where Joyce's car was just disappearing. What might have been was never going to be, and that was just another loss in his life that he was going to have to live with.